

Norman, Mark, *The Folklore of Devon*, University of Exeter Press 2013. ISBN 978-1-80413-036-0

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This truly intriguing and fascinating study written by an expert folklorist. The author (N.) has recently been appointed as the new Recorder of Folklore for the Devonshire Association, so the reader will not be disappointed by the rich material which appears in this book. Perhaps, for a non-British reader interested in myth and folklore in general, Devon is not such a well-known county in England, at least not so much as Cornwall with its connections with the King Arthur legend and other literary and cinematic associations. However, Devon, in the southwest of England, shares with the neighbouring county of Cornwall a beautiful and varied landscape of rough coast, long sandy beaches and moors, and can claim a diverse and ancient heritage of stories, beliefs and superstitions, as this book exhaustively demonstrates.

The introduction begins by presenting some ideas about the term 'folklore', understood as the beliefs of 'the people'. N. affirms the idea which will be expanded in the last chapter that it is a misconception to think that something cannot be considered as folklore if it is not old. N. also contrasts his work with what he calls 'coffee table' books about folklore in Devon, aimed at the tourist market, which lack the in-depth analysis of the content of the stories which is the objective of his book.

The first chapter examines the situation of Devon in relation to the practice of folklore collection, emphasizing the valuable role of the Devonshire Association (founded in 1862) in recording local folklore. As N. points out, Devon abounds in folklore, but not *especiallly* so when compared with other areas; in fact every county enjoys a similar wealth of traditions and customs, ancient and modern. The distinction lies in the fact that Devon has been lucky enough to possess good records, and to have been the home of some excellent collectors of folklore, who are chronologically listed and profiled in this chapter.

Chapter 2 is dedicated to the remote and lonely moors, a special and significant feature of Devon's landscape notably Exmoor and Dartmoor and it is no surprise that many stories and folktales originated in these wild and isolated areas with their stone-scattered landscape, which has also inspired several literary works. N. remarks possible connections with a novel by R.D. Blackmore, *Lorna Doone*, about a fictional family; the plot could have been inspired by legends circulating in the area at the time the novel was written. N. also refers to some more modern tales about supernatural animals, for example the so-called 'Beast of Exmoor'.

Chapter 3 shows how traditions related to the cycle of the year are and have been important in Devon, especially in the past, when agriculture made a much greater impact on people's lives than it does today. N. singles out several particular dates in the year with stories and traditions associated with them. It would have been helpful here to find a more extended comparison with similar traditions not only in other parts of Britain, but also with other parts of the world, as most of these beliefs or stories have parallels in other countries.

Chapter 4 deals with beliefs attached to agriculture, and to the prediction of favourable weather conditions, particularly popular superstitions, predictions and proverbial sayings about rain.

Chapter 5 is dedicated to the alleged presence of the Devil in Devon. N. begins by mentioning traces left in the landscape of Devon by legendary visits of the Devil, for example in place names and in geographical features such as Devil's bridges or unusual rocks which look out of place. This phenomenon is of course by no means exclusive to Devon: Devil's footprints are familiar worldwide. Reports of this phenomenon from Devon are as recent as 2009. Obviously these names and stories may have a religious connotation, as when

the Devil prevents churches from being built. Folklorist Jeremy Harte points out (note 2 in the chapter) that sometimes tales of the Devil come to replace other stories about mythical characters, for example giants, who had an older presence in the location concerned. N. also notes that the Devil's relationship with humans is not limited to geology, as there are stories in several places in Devon about the Devil disguised as a handsome man and the love he inspires in a local girl with possible tragic consequences.

Chapter 6 explores the fascinating subject of fairies (also called pixies). As usual in this book, the focus is largely on Devon, with little in the way of a broader perspective: the reader will not find a more general investigation of the topic of fairies apart from N.'s observation that the concept of a small sprite is a particular ancient one found all over the world. N. does, however, mention a 19th century explanation of the existence of stories about fairies, namely that they were a folk memory of a prehistoric race, but this theory, as N. points out, has been essentially discredited for the lack of evidence. In this chapter there are only very few examples of fairy themes in literature or mythology, and the stories and traditions discussed are mainly Devon-based. Motifs included are: how fairies help with work in return for offerings; the physical appearance of fairies (in some cases they look like ugly small men); fairies in the landscape; the theme of the pixie-leading or getting lost or taken by the fairies, a motif used by people to explain many situations (including spending too long in the pub and losing one's way afterwards...). Referring to the motif of the *changeling* (stories in which children are taken away from their cribs and replaced by sick and ugly children, supposedly the children of fairies or supernatural women), N. remarks that in Devon there are few cases compared with other areas (perhaps a reader would expect an attempt to explain this difference?). In this chapter we miss a reference to two experts on fairies, in traditions and literature: Katherine Briggs and Diane Purkiss.

In Chapter 7, dedicated to the Devon Hauntings, N. begins by remarking that presenting the idea that Devon is 'the most haunted county in Britain' would be just the kind of assertion one would expect to find in a popular book or website about the subject (needless to say, the same would apply to a similar style of book about Cornwall, Somerset, etc.). However, as N. rightly states, that kind of comment is not relevant to a serious folklore study. Accordingly, N.'s chapter on hauntings does not aim to look for evidence for the existence of ghosts, but rather to examine common motifs in the ghost stories told in Devon. N. cites a number of stories about ghostly activity related to secret rooms and tunnels in places such as Chambercombe Manor in Ilfracombe, cases of *poltergeist*, etc. In some instances the tales were invented by smugglers to keep people away; in other cases they derive from personal experiences, with names and dates supplied; yet other cases are what N. calls the 'folk ghost', either a belief onto which historical events are mapped, or something more mythical (though N. does not explain what he understands by 'mythical' as opposed to 'folkloric').

Chapter 8 delves into a more specific ghostly presence and the stories connected with it: the Black

Dog. This phenomenon, recorded worldwide and connected with the mythical motif of the Wild Hunt, was well known across Europe in the Middle Ages, although, as N. remarks, it was most prevalent in the United Kingdom: it was supposed that the Saxons thought of Dartmoor as the home of the Nordic god Odin and his Wild Hunt, so that Dartmoor is a very appropriate location for these stories. Here N. takes the popular novel by Arthur Conan Doyle *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, situated precisely in Dartmoor, as a springboard to explore the folklore on this topic. Conan Doyle's novel is of course a work of fiction, but N. argues that its author may have drawn inspiration from his knowledge of Dartmoor folkloric stories. Indeed Black Dogs do appear in Devon folklore in relation to the dead, as an omen of some kind.

Chapter 9 is devoted to witchcraft, a theme which could hardly fail to appear in a book about folklore, beliefs and superstitions. The chapter begins with the three women (the Bideford Witches) who were among the last to be tried and executed for witchcraft in the UK; they were hanged in 1682. N. refers to stereotypes of witchcraft and the popular images of witches, including cinematic representations. Among the subjects discussed are the so-called White Witch of Exeter, and magical procedures used as protection. Concerning the topic of 'overlooking', that is, the use of magic to cause ill fortune or bad health, the author identifies certain pertinent stories. One of the best ways to protect yourself against magic was precisely to use magic, which was done on the advice of a person such as the 'white witch'. N. includes here records of Devonian stories and superstitions around the use of certain objects for this purpose, for instance, animal hearts. Cases mentioned here demonstrate how the fears of a community draw upon cultural themes relevant to them at the time.

The final chapter is dedicated to modern folklore. The author insists on the idea which he presented at the beginning of the book, that it is not true that folklore has no relevance to modern life. He refers to the concept developed by William John Thoms (1803-1885) that 'folklore' in its simplest form relates to the beliefs (lore) of the people (folk); when this term was first used in the 19th century the term 'folk' was used to mean uneducated rural dwellers – hence the misconception that folklore now relates only to these old practices and traditions. N. remarks, following the affirmation by the folklorist Lynne S. McNeill, that the internet is the 'largest unintentional folklore archive'. On the internet it is easy to find Facebook groups on Devon Folklore, platforms to record and tell stories which are now archived for future use. However, as many readers know today, one should be a bit sceptical about the information one finds on the internet about *any* subject; certainly in terms of research, it is better not to believe everything which is repeated on the internet. Anyway, the author mentions some examples of the 'creation of folklore' by internet users. This includes, for instance, debates between the people of Devon and its neighbouring county of Cornwall about the right way to eat scones in the traditional 'cream tea', whether spread with clotted cream first and then topped with jam, or spread first with jam and then topped with cream. (I wonder if speculation of this sort should really be

described in terms of 'folklore'...) The chapter also discusses such themes as supernatural encounters and UFO sightings, as well as the impact on modern folklore of popular television programmes about the paranormal.

The text of the book is accompanied by suggestive illustrations by Rhianna Wynter, although the reader might have also expected some photos relevant to the landscape features which are discussed. After the endnotes the book finishes with an extensive bibliography, which includes a list of relevant web sites.

To conclude, this is a very interesting and well written book. However, there is very little contextualisation

of Devonian folklore in relation to the folklore of other parts of Britain, not to mention outside Britain, nor are there any reflections about the relationship between folklore and myth. As to contextualisation, this would be more relevant to chapters dedicated to themes such as fairies and witchcraft, as opposed to the more genuinely 'local' chapters such as the one about the moors, which are a special landscape feature of Devon. Ultimately the book is not written for a reader who is looking for a more general, theoretical analysis of the themes covered; rather, it focuses on the more local and particular cases in Devon, and in that respect the book is definitely very rich, assuming that the reader will add the rest.

